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THE INDIAN GREAT HORNED OWL
KIRTHAR NATIONAL PARK
ELEPHANTS
DRAGONFLIES & DAMSELFLIES

SILENT WINGS

The Indian great horned owl

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It was strange. Three or four flashes went off, quite unexpectedly, though I knew the owl was nowhere near the nest. Perplexed, I silently made my way in the dark to where I had earlier set up my elaborate light-activated, trip-shutter camera and flash equipment. I detected the culprits at once. Moths and other tiny insects kept breaking the narrow light beam which was supposed to go off only when the Indian great horned owl visited or left its nest. A whole roll of film had been wasted. I cursed my thoughtlessness for, though this was my first attempt at remote photography, I had often read of such 'phantom' exposures caused by insects. I had wasted enormous amounts of film that night, but, as I discovered in my dark room the next day, I did manage to get *one* good exposure of the owl in mid-flight. I felt on top of the world. Preparations for my next trip began immediately.

My fascination for owls had been kindled two decades ago, by a chance encounter with the legendary O.C. Edwards, pioneer of bird photography in India. In fact, I was shooting in Banerghatta, a small thickly-wooded forest only a few kilometres from Bangalore, which is where I had met Edwards for the first time so many years ago.

Owls are much maligned birds. Their nocturnal habits and vaguely human expressions have led to superstitious tales of ghosts, and unfounded fears that these quiet night predators spell misfortune to human beings. That they are more often heard than seen—in dark and lonely places—has only served to deepen the mysteries woven around them.

A soft, grating 'karrh, karrh' call alerted me to the presence of the Banerghatta owls at around 10 p.m. I had waited over four hours for their return; this was my second field trip. Earlier that day I had fixed my

A stately rock-brown, hen owl (facing page) suspiciously turns her bright, tawny eyes on to the photographer as he approaches. Two long, erect, ear-like feathers have given this bird its name; though, of course, they have nothing to do with the bird's acute sense of hearing.



Tiny, fluffy and very vulnerable, these owl chicks show no indication of the powerful, stealthy, nocturnal hunters they will soon develop into. These two young ones have just emerged from their eggs while a third egg is yet to hatch.



Well-hidden behind a huge rock under the watchful eye of its parent, a young owl stretches its wings as though to test their potential power. Its home is a chamber cleft into a rock—ideal protection both against inclement weather and possible predators.



An owl sallies forth from its rocky nest, powerful wings held aloft. So intricate and well-designed are its feathers that the bird can fly virtually soundlessly to overcome its prey with complete surprise.



motor-driven camera to a make-shift wooden support 2.1 metres from the ledge of the nest site, around 2.75 metres above the ground. I had an 80 mm. lens attached to the camera body, the electronic flash was fixed to the right, 30 cm. closer to the nest. The photo-electric trigger receiver was attached by means of a ball and socket unit to another wooden support just above, and 1.5 metres away from

the camera. I had done everything I could. The rest I knew was up to Dame Fortune and my friends, the owls. My son had helped me to rig up our equipment and we both scarcely breathed as we awaited the outcome of our efforts. Flash! Was it the owl? We dared not switch on our hand-held torch for fear of further disturbing the owls. Patience, they say, brings its own rewards and we were more



than adequately rewarded that night.

I had been on the look-out for breeding owls for several months and was lucky enough to have discovered this nest with its clutch of four, oval eggs in the last week of December. They lay on the bare earth, tucked into a deep crevice—a sort of triangular chamber clefted into a large rock. The nesting site was ideal.

A parent bird lands in its nest with its prey. It is the male that usually and most frequently goes out hunting to return a short while later with its prey, which is then passed carefully on to his mate who proceeds to feed her ever-hungry, clamouring young.

The young ones were protected from the weather and their home was well hidden from all but the very persistent searcher such as myself. For days before setting up our equipment my son and I observed the pair of owls fly to and fro in the vicinity of their chosen nest site. I now recognised the large, stocky birds as familiar friends. Rock-brown in colour, streaked with darker markings on their fronts, their orange-yellow eyes often followed our movements expressionlessly. We saw two, long, ear-like feathers erect over the head—the ‘horns’ after which the owls were named.

While the female incubated her eggs, her mate was not to be seen, during the day. Come dusk, however, he would silently appear, perch himself some 20 metres away from the nest and softly call to her. Their duets were normally a prelude to what we presume were their nightly hunts, for soon one or the other bird would fly off. The nest was virtually never left unattended.

As for us, we must have made a curious and somewhat amusing sight. Having read of the experiences of renowned owl experts such as Eric Hosking, both my son and I sported fibreglass helmets as protection from the talons of the owls. We were, of course, less concerned about how we looked and more about our safety. The helmet saved us from severe mauling on more than one occasion. One afternoon I was struck by the bird from behind as I was securing the camera to its wooden support. So great was the impact on my helmet that I lost my balance and would have plunged to the ground had I not grasped the wooden strut for support. On its second sortie it grazed my eyebrow and I was lucky not to lose an eye. On yet another occasion my son was ‘dive-bombed’ twice and once the owl actually drew blood from his unprotected back. But these are acceptable risks considering the very great emotional rewards to be gained in observing these awe-inspiring predators. Interestingly, we were never ever



An Indian great horned owl makes straight for the 'intruder' (top) who sports a fibreglass helmet as protection against its sharp talons. It was always the female that displayed aggression, notes the author, the male's role seemed confined to that of a bread-winner. A full grown, adventurous owlet (above) hisses and stares menacingly at the camera, confident and probably well aware that its mother is not too far away.



Gastric pellets of the owl (top). These pellets that are ejected via the bird's mouth contain hair, feathers, bones and teeth—all material that cannot be easily digested. Here some rodent's jaw bones can be easily identified. The return of a parent owl with its prey in its beak (above) is greeted with great excitement by the youngsters, to whom food is all-important at this stage in their young lives. The mother will now hold the carcass down with her talons, dismember it piece by piece and then feed her young.

attacked by the male. It was always the female that displayed aggression. We presume that the male's assigned role was more that of bread-winner than protector. Within two weeks of discovering the eggs we were pleasantly surprised one morning to find in their place two hatchlings, less than a day old and an unhatched egg. The fourth egg had mysteriously vanished. We did not closely approach the nest too often and when we looked in on the family a week later we were greeted by the sight of three, puffy balls adorned with downy feathers, huge, satiny eyes and pointed beaks. Besides the three hatchlings was the decapitated body of a freshly-killed rat.

During the period that we kept a vigil on the nest site we had a spell of inclement weather. The female owl could be seen bravely brooding her young, quite unmindful of the constant drizzle and the sharp cyclonic winds. I marvelled at the strong maternal instincts nature has bestowed on living creatures which ensured the survival of their young, often against insurmountable odds. All through our photographic expedition I felt a subconscious guilt for the disturbance we were causing the owl family. All guilt, however, vanished when we visited the owls late one afternoon. The first thing I noticed was that the mother was not near her nest. This was most unusual because at this stage in her infants' lives the mother owl almost *never* leaves her chicks unattended.

Our concern soon turned to alarm when the female suddenly swooped down on us to launch several unprovoked warning attacks even though we were a 'safe' distance from her nest. We decided to inspect the nest to find out why the female was not approaching it and enlisted the help of a villager who happened to be standing nearby. When my son climbed up to the nest he called out to me saying, "The hatchlings are fine but some T.V. antenna-like contraption has been placed in the nest." By now our helper was

Equipment, perseverance and a bit of luck all combined to produce a series of rewarding photographs which were used by the author to educate the local villagers on the usefulness of this bird in controlling pest populations.









looking decidedly uncomfortable and was beginning to edge away from me. The contraption, it turned out, was nothing but a bird-lime-covered trap which the villager had placed in order to ensnare the owl. A tongue-lashing and severe threats to his person revealed that he was a basket weaver and that he had been advised to catch an owl for its fat which had curative powers that would help remedy a malady from which he was suffering. His convoluted explanation involved *tantra* and the usual nonsense about the supernatural. I sent him packing, a few rupees richer, and warned him that he would not live to see another day if he ever returned to Banerghatta. That was the last we saw of him. Our presence had saved the owls. As we left the site after removing the vicious but effective trap, we were delighted to see the mother owl return to her young ones from a perch 100 metres away, where she had retreated to watch the drama between us and the would-be trapper. How many other wild animals had and would die on account of similar uneducated beliefs, was anyone's guess. In any event, though we took extra-care to disturb the owls even less than we so far had, we felt no further guilt. The owls owed us one!

When our nestlings were twelve days old we decided once again to set up our trip-shutter equipment. We now discovered to our dismay that the female owl, may she be blessed, was as aggressive as ever and treated us as she would any common nest-robber! My son carried scars from her talons for quite a while after he was attacked again by the protective mother. To help with our observations we even constructed a camouflaged hide near the nest site which we would enter well before dusk. From this hide we could observe the life-cycle of the owls more closely. The owls would become active around 7 p.m. each evening. Twilight would spread like a thin blanket over the forest, and bulbuls, doves and robins could be heard calling a finale to their day. As the sounds of day creatures

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Soaring effortlessly over its domain—the dense, green jungles, forests and cultivated land of Banerghatta—is the 'tiger of the avian species' the Indian great horned owl. Ferocious, vicious when threatened and powerful, the owls provided the author and his son with a fascinating and adventuresome photographic challenge.



A villager holds the lime-covered, T.V. antenna-like contraption that was used to try and capture the Indian great horned owl at its nest. Reasons given by locals for trapping these birds revolve around magical curative powers, sometimes involving *tantra*.

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began to fade, the screech of spotted owlets and the peculiar 'ooh!' of a resident mottled wood owl would sign the advent of night. Before the hush of night descended around us, we invariably heard the loud voices of villagers returning home and occasionally the raucous sound of a blaring transistor radio. Banerghatta is a very disturbed forest. The female owl would usually arrive as a pale shadow gliding onto her nest ledge. Moments later a sort of 'ghu... ghu... ghu...' sound announced the presence of the male. Two phantom shapes would materialise to perch together on a large rock, watching our machan hide intently.

From where we sat in our hide the nest was visible, dimly lit by our trip-trigger light source (to which we had accustomed the young owls gradually over a period of four days). The chicks were a fascinating lot. They would crawl all over the nest, indulging in a series of head-bobbing, wing-stretching and body-bending manoeuvres. This activity

would cease with a sort of hissing sound emanating from their mouths and a rapid 'cut-cut-cut' clicking of their beaks. Food was obviously predominant in the minds of the young owls, for as soon as the 'karh... karh... karh...' of the female was audible the fledglings would peer out anxiously, beaks agape, awaiting their meal.

The male's call was as anxiously awaited by the female as her call was by her young. He would often land on the nest rock with a rat dangling limp from his beak, to transfer the prey daintily to the female. She would walk purposefully into the crevice followed by her excited youngsters. Here she would hold the rat down on the floor with her talons while she dismembered it piece by piece to feed her hungry young. Nothing was wasted. Not even the tails.

All said and done, photographing the Indian great horned owl was by far one of my richest wildlife experiences. Trial and



error soon taught me to get the best possible exposures and I learnt more about owl behaviour than I could ever have gleaned from books. We saw, for instance, that half-eaten carcasses were often carried out of the nest by the owls. On searching, we discovered their larder strewn under rocks and crannies as far as 50 metres from the nest site. They obviously believed in saving for the proverbial rainy day. The range of prey species proved just how valuable owls are to man. Gerbils (*Tatera indica*), mole-rats (*Bandicota bengalensis*), bandicoots (*Bandicota indica*), bush-rats (*Golunda ellioti*) and field mice (*Mus booduga*) formed a major portion of their prey. These rodents rely largely on grain stored for human use and it is significant that the breeding season of the Indian great horned owl (November to April) coincides with the period when rat populations are normally on the increase. After the third week in the lives of these nestlings we noticed that the nest site was strewn with small pieces of pellet-like matter. Later we discovered that the young ones would come to the ledge of the nest crevice, turn round to face the other way and by a quick bending and squatting motion eject their faeces—a white liquid, seen as white streaks on the ledge—thus instinctively maintaining nest-hygiene.

One day during the fourth week I found only two young ones in the nest instead of three; this made me worry about the welfare of the third little fellow. But, strangely enough, two days later the nest contained *all three young ones*. How come? The only explanation for this could be that the biggest of the lot had hopped out of the nest and then later on found his way back. Neither parent owl could possibly have carried the young one physically. So they must have fed this bird at his new place of hiding *during his short adventure!*

Between the seventh and eighth weeks all three young ones had discovered their wings and their freedom. While they were experimenting with this freedom we were

A bit of luck favoured the taking of this picture (facing page), when the owl inadvertently tripped the beam, affording a spectacular sight of wing feathers outstretched, powerful talons and shining eyes, as the bird lands on its rock ledge, a rat dangling from its beak.



The author arranging his equipment on the precarious nest rock prior to a photography 'session' with the owls.

sometimes able to follow their movements outside the nest. One brave fellow, in particular, enthralled us with his cavalier attitude to life. Having fluttered some 300 metres away from home the favourite owl was *walking* jauntily through the forest undercover. As I followed him, photographing him from bush to bush, he clacked his beak at me and hissed away for all he was worth. I had no doubt mother owl was around to defend her young one at this tentative stage in its life, but I never saw her around. Perhaps she stayed discreetly out of sight to instill a sense of confidence into her brood.

The owls had flown. The nest was empty. But we couldn't just break off our assignment quite so soon. We collected our slides and had a get-together with the nearby villagers who had helped us in various ways with our work on owls. Our slides were screened and we explained to them the fact that owls were actually their friends and beneficial to them in controlling rat populations. The villagers admitted their ignorance in this aspect of owl natural history, and offered to now protect them.

Our account would be incomplete without mentioning some names. Krishnappa, Irudhyam and Muniyappa were among those locals who helped us in more ways than we can recall. Then there was the little daredevil Ravi. All of 11 years, he was the son of Muniyappa and his enthusiasm was unbelievable. He stayed awake at night with us in our hide. He fetched and carried miscellaneous equipment. His sharp eyes kept watch, to warn us of the impending arrival of the parent owls, and we were saved from several potential maulings, thanks to his early warnings.